

Home Economics Education in Malta: Extending Beyond the Compulsory School Years for Social and Ecological Well-Being

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Introduction

Home Economics (hereafter HE) has been taught in schools in Malta for over a century and has been responding to the needs and changes in society ever since. Throughout the years it was felt that the subject areas within HE were potentially valuable facilitators of community and societal development. In this paper we discuss how HE education in Malta has extended beyond compulsory schooling to reach individuals and families in our communities. The advantage of being a small island has enabled Home Economists to be actively present on a local and national level, including via the media quite strongly. In keeping with its roots, the vision for an extended HE education has been to disseminate knowledge, foster attitudes and nurture skills so that individuals and families make informed changes and sustainable improvements in their lives, building healthy attitudes towards food, exercise, the natural environment, as well as seeking to build stronger relationships and to become wiser consumers. In the outreach programmes, talks and activities Home Economists aim to encourage and enable positive change by enhancing people's decisions, practices and self-esteem. As stated by the Minister of Education Hon. Evarist Bartolo in the Malta National Lifelong Learning strategy 2020, "access to relevant learning throughout life is a fundamental cornerstone in our aspirations to have a sustainable knowledge-based society and economy" (p.5).

In Malta, currently HE is offered as a compulsory subject in the first two years of secondary schooling (11-12 year olds). It alternates with two other subjects throughout the year, so a student will only be exposed to HE topics for one term in the first year of secondary schooling and one term in the second year. From the third year to the fifth year, HE is a specialist subject and thus needs to be chosen as an option area in order to be studied. The subject can then continue to be studied at post-secondary level as an Intermediate and Advanced level subject and at university where one can follow a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) Honours degree in HE. This vision of the B.Sc. in HE is to offer professional training for career paths which can help improve the quality of life and well-being for individuals, families and society. It does this by focusing on effective, creative and responsible resource management and behaviour change strategies in the broadest sense, which foster sustainable well-being through personal and outreach initiatives and actions.

Extending beyond compulsory schooling

Traditionally and internationally, HE has contributed to different degrees to evidence and skills-based food, nutrition, health, family, consumer, personal finance, environmental and entrepreneurial education beyond compulsory schooling. HE has been regarded as a relevant discipline to securing a decent quality of life, in that it aims to help people *live well* (Apple, 2015). HE and its use of a social and ecological justice pedagogy can be a vehicle or a tool to encourage civic participation as a means to improve the lives of people and the planet (Dupuis, 2017). HE outreach comes as a result of an awareness of current issues of social importance and a sense of citizenship, thus then identifying what HE can target; for example the need to improve diet in relation to climate change, the need for sound knowledge on nutrition and personal

finance in the light of financial and food insecurity, or the need to live a more sustainable life for environmental conservation and economic fairness. HE as manifested in its multiple literacies: -- health literacy, food literacy, consumer literacy, environmental literacy, financial literacy, technological literacy, and social literacy -- can reach different target populations, at different states of their lifecycle with practical guidance for holistic wellbeing (Piscopo, 2016).

This paper will share the multi-faceted approach taken by Maltese HE practitioners or university students as outreach to society in Malta in relation to HE topics. The need for this ongoing outreach as a service to the community, but also as means of strengthening the HE professional community and publicizing the profession and discipline has been highlighted previously by Piscopo and Mugliett (2012). Moreover, as outlined by Piscopo (2019) in a presentation at the Canada Home Economics Association 15th Symposium, Home Economists need to be able to educate about choices related to products and services keeping in mind current societal needs, yet also considering changing societies, changing environments and potential futures. There is the value of instilling HE literacy among learners for smart, informed and creative citizens, consumers, household managers and family members.

Outreach in schools

Compulsory schooling incorporates a curriculum for students aged 5 – 16 which has a structure and a framework in order to lead students to national examinations after which they will obtain a level 3 of the national qualifications framework. However, this does not mean that the curriculum addresses enough knowledge and skills on HE related topics to last a lifetime. Indeed, the Home Economics Seminar Centre (a state specialist institution employing a team of HE teachers) is often asked to run special half day Seminars for Primary and Secondary level pupils on-site in schools on topics such as good nutrition, money management and sustainable consumption BSc HE students have also been involved in projects where they have run a series of sessions over 5 weeks during After School Clubs for 3 to 16-year-olds. Topics covered were budgeting, repurposing and recycling, using leftovers, healthy snacks and sustainable consumption (e.g. issues around fair trade, palm oil and plastics). All this culminated in an Open Evening for the parents/guardians of the pupils where various work created by the pupils was exhibited and the snacks on offer were also prepared by the pupils.

At the same time, schools should be viewed as communities which are conducive to providing learning for all the adults within the same communities. Thus, many times schools are the institutions where extension work is carried out with parents, teachers or even School Management Teams. This could take the format, for example, of organising presentations or booths at school Eco Days or Health Days, of running sustainable food campaigns in the school, of continuing professional development sessions for teachers on good nutrition, or of talks and workshop sessions for parents and guardians on healthy school packed lunches for children or avoiding food waste. Specific well-being sessions with teachers and the Senior Management Team are becoming a common element of the annual School Development Plan and HE educators are frequent guest speakers or facilitators. Parents are also often invited to morning Special Assemblies, Open days or Special day events where HE themes may be included. Healthy, sustainable lifestyles are typical themes, such as when schools organise edutainment involving a Home Economist-created mascot called *Fonzu l-Fenek* (Fonzu the Rabbit) whose goal is to foster healthier lifestyle changes among young children. The Fonzu edutainment is

often complemented by more formal active learning sessions in class or by hands-on cooking sessions. These are run by HE teachers sometimes alongside the children's parents or guardians. Other activities which take place in some schools and have been started off by Home Economists are Chef's Challenge days which bring in parents and guardians to partner with groups of children and which encourage teamwork, healthy eating and a knowledge of cuisines from around the world. The various HE activities mentioned above seek to promote multiple skills, from critical thinking and decision-making, to time management and creative problem-solving.

Outreach in the community

Communicating with different publics is an integral component of the training all HE students following undergraduate and graduate programmes at the University of Malta. They have several opportunities throughout their course to practise promoting HE knowledge and skills for the well-being of individuals, families and society. Under lecturer guidance, students create, develop and deliver talks and activities on health, food, nutrition, consumer, personal finance, time management and environmental topics, among others. Some examples of activities held are:

- Talks with an elderly well-being focus within Active Ageing centres in Malta where senior citizens attend on a daily basis;
- Hosting a day of activities which include talks on dietary guidelines and food preparation and tasting at a centre which gives shelter to youth who find themselves at the edge of society;
- Organising a series of game-based educational sessions about healthy eating and time management, including health snack making demonstrations and hands-on food preparation activities at a Football Nursery, targeting mainly the young 5-11-year old trainees, but also having the coaches and parents and guardians as observers;
- Setting up booths at Farmers' Markets to promote traditional and modern dishes using local seasonal food and demonstrating how to use leftovers or parts of produce normally discarded.
- Organising a world café style workshop on sustainable living practices for families with young children and for Girl Guides and Boy Scouts during a special month-long exhibition on the Green Planet.

One particular initiative which has been running for some years now is the Għaqal id-Dar, Hajja Aħjar (Being Smart at Home for a Better Life) programme created by the Home Economists in Action professional association in collaboration with the Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity, the Department of Local Government, Local Councils, other state and non-state entities and Non-Governmental Organisations. This programme comprises 10-weekly sessions where the overall aim is to empower the participants to feel competent to make lifestyle changes and improve their quality of life and that of their families. During the session, HE teachers who act as facilitators strive to show and guide participants on how to make better use of their resources, and other resources which they can access, in a responsible and smart way. Knowledge and skills covered address several areas including time and organisational management, health, food and nutrition, first aid, consumer rights, personal finance, energy and water saving strategies, and waste reduction and management. The course adopts an active learning approach where case studies, projection, group discussions, peer teaching, healthy, sustainable food preparation and goal-setting are some of the andragogy utilised. Evaluation by participants has indicated that the course serves to build on and consolidate knowledge already

owned and introduce new knowledge and skills. The sessions motivate participants to take action to improve their decision-making and actions, keeping in mind sustainability principles, boost self-esteem and self-efficacy and also provide an opportunity for socialising and making new friends, especially for those who tend to experience isolation (Piscopo, 2014; Debono, 2018). In 2016, the course received two national awards from the European Platform for Adult Learning and Education - 1st Runner Up for 'Award for Outstanding Community Initiative' and 2nd Runner Up for the 'Award for Innovative Adult Learning Project'.

Outreach on the media

The media is a powerful tool and in Malta radio and television are seen as popular channels to reach out to people. Based on a 2018 national survey (Axiaq, 2018), 71.8% of adult respondents claimed to be regular radio listeners; 51.4% listened to radio every day while another 20.4% did so at least once a week. Only 8.1% of respondents stated that they never listened to radio, while 18.9% stated that they were not regular radio listeners. Males tended to listen more regularly to radio [72.7%] than females. Radio listening increased with age from half of all 12-20 year olds [54.8%] to more than three-quarters of those over 50 years old [77.3% for 51-70 year olds and 70.8% for 70+ year olds]. With respect to television, discussion and current affairs programmes ranked third [12.6%] in popularity, whereas cultural/educational programmes ranked fourth [9.3%] (Axiaq, 2018).

Home Economists in Malta have long recognised the power and efficiency of using radio and television to disseminate both scientific and practical HE-related knowledge and skills to a broad audience. These two forms of media offer opportunities to reach out to different people in society, from varied age groups and having different work-related and lifestyle routines, by utilising types of programming and schedule of programmes to target these different population groups. At times Home Economists are guest speakers and at other times they are regular speakers participating once a week or once a fortnight on a specific national radio or television programme. This has been going on for a number of years. Feedback from listeners or viewers is often very positive and encouraging, typically highlighting appreciation for the practical and applied nature of what is presented and also pledging to pass on the information to their children who would often be young parents. Some Home Economists have, in fact, become household names and some others are building a name.

The work of Home Economists in Malta is not limited to television or radio, but also encompasses social media, newspapers and local magazines. Blogs, Facebook pages and printed articles are produced where the Home Economics vision of nurturing wellbeing in a smart, responsible yet pleasurable way features strongly. In a similar vein, another way of disseminating knowledge has been through recipes. For example, information on the need to eat fresh, local and sustainable food, to eat according to the seasons, to eat healthy food which is low in sugar and fat, whilst retaining flavour and taste, to include more fruit and vegetables in the diet, was presented through practical, simple, economical and healthy recipes in a book created by Mugliett (2010). The book promotes the concept of eating together as a family, of home-cooking as the ideal way to introduce family members to different tastes and a healthy food culture from early on in life, and it encourages budgeting, planning and organisation so as not to be overwhelmed with the daily task of food preparation. The notion of seasonal food is tackled through four sections of the book, each section being devoted to a particular season. The reason

for this is because due to importation and availability of produce all the year round, individuals and families may have lost the knowledge of what is in season. In addition, the abundance of availability of highly processed foods may have also contributed to the loss of knowledge of traditional recipes and rituals related to fresh, local and seasonal produce. Hence through recipes, tips and bite size information, this book created by a Home Economist facilitates increasing knowledge on healthy, economic and sustainable ingredients (Mugliett, 2010).

Outreach on a national level

Over the years, as recognition grew with regard to what the HE discipline stands for and what HE professionals can offer, Home Economists have been invited and engaged to contribute on a national level in policy drafting and implementation and in national research and projects. This has all come about as a result of constant and persistent work as identified above and thereafter being recognised as credible professionals who can contribute in different spheres. Examples of such involvement include a Home Economist being appointed as Food Safety Commissioner Chairperson, as well as appointments as directors or advisors on statutory or NGO boards dealing with adoption, consumer disputes, science and technology, the environment and vulnerable people in society. Home Economists have also led or contributed to initiatives of national importance such as drafting the National Dietary Guidelines and regulatory policies related to school food and childcare standards, as well as national research related to couple relationships and reference budgets for a decent living. As the body of professional Home Economists grows and as more Home Economists are visible in the mass media, it is envisaged that the outreach at national level will increase as different Home Economists seek to specialise in different spheres and thus be able to confidently contribute to a various sectors impacting family and community well-being.

Conclusion

As stated by Geraldine Hodelin (2014), “[h]ome economists believe that this profession has the capacity to retool itself in terms of serving the needs of the evolving universal family. HE is the profession that has the interest and willingness to take the advancing demands of the evolving family in relation to its ability to live and act in an ever changing world, and to integrate these demands into the discipline for study, development and refinement” (p. 202). She goes on to state, “the malleable characteristic of HE is for the social good of communities that depends so much on the individual members, as well as on the group of individuals arranged as families for its meaningful interpretation of predictable social order”. (p.203) It is within this spirit that Home Economists in Malta have worked tirelessly to bring the discipline and all the benefits it can offer to the community, and it is within this spirit that future Home Economists are being trained so that their work extends in different sectors to promote ecological and social wellbeing.

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